

CITIZENS' ADVISORY COMMITTEE TO THE READING OVR

MARCH 8, 2022

MEETING 1:00 PM TO 3:00PM

VIRTUALLY OVER MICROSOFT TEAMS

ATTENDEES:

- Meeting called to order at 1:05 PM.
- 11 in attendance, plus 3 guests – RDO Transition Supervisor Kim B and new hires to RDO staff, Robyn W and Corey T.

1. REVIEW AND APPROVAL OF MINUTES:

- Motion made to accept minutes from Dec 2021 meeting. Motion: Andrew Second: Alli
- Previous minutes have been sent to PARC and we are waiting for those to be updated.

2. OVR REPORT AND LEGISLATION: (YVELISSE GONZALEZ)

- Introduced new OVR interns, Robyn W. and Corey T., who are attending CAC meeting to better understand the CAC and its purposes as part of their training.
 - Robyn will likely be part of the Transition unit
 - Corey is interested in working with veterans, as he is a veteran himself.
- Number of new referrals is increasing.
 - RDO received approximately 60 referrals in the month of January 2022
 - January 2022 is the first month since March 2020 to be above 50 referrals
 - Many new referrals are for transition age group
 - This is thanks to Early Reach Coordinators (ERCs) being active in their assigned schools and bringing in new referrals
 - Also, the end of the school year is approaching, and there is historically an increase in applicants from the transition age group this time of year
 - Since September 2021, RDO has approved allowing the paper copy of the application to be distributed to liaison sites.
 - RDO receives many applications by phone, which takes up a lot of clerical time to process applications. Hopefully paper applications being returned to the community will help reduce phone volume.
 - Online applications remain complicated and Central Office has not given an update regarding whether there are updated instructions on how to apply
 - The paper application has been available in the forms bank for more than a year
 - Paper applications allow customers to complete an application over weekends, evenings, etc. or are unable to navigate the online application.
 - Paper applications have been distributed to SAM and other liaison sites.
 - When a paper application is received, clerical will enter the pre-application and upload it to the file.
- Question: What is the procedure for CareerLink to recommend an individual with a disability to OVR? Is this a process that is done between the CareerLinks and OVR, and is it an easy process? Did the CareerLink get paper applications for OVR?

- OVR staff should be in the CareerLinks as often as possible to be available to the public and answer any questions that come up. They would be first contact with the public to discuss an individual's disabilities and whether OVR would be a good fit for them, then how to apply.
- Schuylkill CareerLink has few problems regarding this, as it serves as a headquarters for many of the Schuylkill County staff, so there is RDO staff there almost every day.
- Berks CareerLink has more issues as the RDO staff are not there as often.
- RDO staff is supposed to be in Berks CareerLink for a half day on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays
- When RDO is at full capacity, 6 Berks adult VRCs go to the CareerLink throughout the week, totaling one half-day per week per counselor.
- Transition counselors are not included in the CareerLink liaison because they are in person in the schools in their territories
- Berks RDO staff seems reluctant to go to Berks CareerLink. Yvelisse toured the Berks CareerLink to better understand potential issues and solve them while strengthening the communication with Berks CareerLink staff.
- Tour was successful, and Yvelisse has requested all RDO supervisors and Berks County counselors schedule a tour together with the Berks CareerLink staff to meet, break the ice, ask questions, and address potential issues together.
- Question: Many people have invisible or less-visible disabilities. Does everyone visiting the CareerLink receive OVR information? How does OVR know that all who might benefit from OVR services are being reached? Is it possible that staff between CareerLink and RDO staff are missing potential customers?
 - Staff who work in the Berks CareerLink Resource Room have training in this matter. A disability may be disclosed during discussions with the staff there, or it may be observed by CareerLink staff. At that time, they are directed to OVR staff in the office for more information about how OVR may be able to assist them.
 - Berks CareerLink is attempting to contract with Keystone Deaf and Hard of Hearing for translators to service the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community.
 - Berks CareerLink is attempting to be as disability friendly as possible.
 - Wheelchair accessible desks / tables
 - Staff assistance as necessary
 - As OVR is supposed to be the disability experts for jobseekers, the best solution is to have RDO staff become more engaged with CareerLink and more present in the community to offer their expertise to those who might benefit from it.
- Question: What about individuals who lack awareness of their own disabilities? For example, individuals with traumatic brain injuries may not recognize their own disability. How does CareerLink ensure such individuals are being given the opportunity to learn about OVR?
 - Yvelisse is uncertain about this answer. It may benefit both the CAC and the CareerLink to have the CAC present at a CareerLink staff meeting. If the CAC is able to reach out to the CareerLink they may be able to better understand what CareerLink is already doing to ensure everyone who might benefit from OVR receives the necessary information. This may help solve problems that might be present in the CareerLink approach.
- Question: Could CareerLink find someone who would be a member of the CAC to facilitate interaction with both CAC and OVR?
 - Yvelisse will send the Berks and Schuylkill CareerLinks an email and CC the CAC to find out if there is any interest.
 - Berks CareerLink has a large interest in assistive technology and accessibility, so it is likely someone from CareerLink will be available for this function.

- There have been several discussions with the DA/ADA conference, the RDO safety committee, and others regarding reopening the office to the public.
 - Currently masks are no longer mandatory, though some staff continue wearing them due to personal preference.
 - Central Office stated that they will inform RDO 2 weeks prior to reopening to the public to ensure everyone is prepared and the office is in order for the public to resume visits.
- RDO currently has a successful closure rate of 73% for this fiscal year.
 - The office goal was not high due to various openings/vacancies and the continuing COVID-19 pandemic
- RDO continues to redistribute caseloads to reduce the feeling of VRCs being overworked.
 - Case load numbers remain high and need to be assigned carefully to ensure relief to high case load numbers
 - Some caseloads are around 150 cases, which is very high for the VRCs
 - RDO is trying to avoid burnout among VRCs to prevent more staff attrition
- RDO Staffing updates: 2 interviews are scheduled for this week.
 - Hiring announcements for PA OVR have been seen on Indeed. These announcements link back to the Neogov site, where all applications must be submitted.
 - OVR cannot see who has applied until the Neogov listing is taken down, adding to a delay in contacting interested applicants and a potential bottleneck for getting new hires onboarded and trained / working
 - The intern list was up for approximately one month (longer than it usually is) and just came down
 - There were only 2 interested applicants that applied at that time
 - Most internships fill in the fall
 - The listing for regular VRC positions has been posted and is expected to be pulled in early April 2022
 - Lists are being reposted immediately
 - OVR has been pushing HR to relist all postings until all vacancies are filled
 - New hire Corey shared his experience: He applied for internship in August 2021, but he did not start work with OVR until February 14, 2022
 - HR was very short-staffed during the time period between summer 2021 and winter 2022, which meant that he took months to get through the system
 - It is likely that situations like Corey's have led to many lost candidates
 - Interns need the work hours to complete their degrees
 - Unemployed individuals cannot wait months for their job to start
- Question: Is there an update regarding the minimum requirement for the degrees for the VRC positions?
 - Central Office is still in talks about this with the union. The process started in summer 2021, but there is no definitive conclusion to this discussion at this time.
 - Central Office have done away with the VRC Trainee position, but the addition of new master's degrees is not yet in place
 - RDO is excited and eager for this update because there are many local psychology, social worker, education, etc. master's degree holders in the area that would be available as potential hires without competing with other office.
 - Local hires are more likely to stay in the area as they have their families / support networks already in place here.
- RDO has been inviting different organizations to present at staff meetings

- This has also led to an increase in referrals as community partners become more aware of OVR's purpose and mission
- RDO is actively seeking collaboration with other agencies in the area and informing them of what OVR does
- Many organizations have been from Berks county, but RDO wants more contact and inroads to Schuylkill county
 - Sarita is familiar with Schuylkill county and will assist with suggesting possible connections to help customers access other services and connections in Schuylkill county
 - Any other suggestions of possible Schuylkill county connections are welcome.
- Guest Kim B. presented on the state of RDO's transition unit.
 - In July 2021 CWDS launched Pre-ETS 2.0
 - There were many challenges at the time of roll-out.
 - Some items are still awaiting fixes.
 - There are many changes and fixes that have been implemented, and Pre-ETS cases can now be authorized for services.
 - RDO group services are going very well.
 - Berks and Schuylkill combined currently have more than 50 paid group services authorized.
 - Average size of each group is 18
 - More than 500 students have been reached between the two counties
 - Schuylkill involvement is 1/3 of the involvement in Berks county
 - Nearly all group services are being held in person at this time
 - Summer programs planned for the RDO
 - Professional Connections
 - Available to both open and potentially eligible students
 - 60 hours total
 - Stipend paid after 54 hours have been completed
 - Includes career exploration, interest inventories, self-advocacy training, tours, and job shadowing
 - My Work
 - Available in both Berks and Schuylkill counties
 - Requires an open OVR case
 - Has met with OVR counselor and returned initial set of signed paperwork and case moved to status 02
 - 6 or 8 weeks paid experience
 - Minimum pay is \$10.35 / hour
 - Partnering with local municipalities to perform work that needs to be done, often in landscaping / groundskeeping and filing / clerical work
 - Will be RDO's first year participating
 - Goodwill SWEAP (Summer Work Experience and Assessment Program)
 - Longstanding participation with RDO
 - 5 weeks, 3 days per week, 20 hours per week
 - Includes assessment for strengths, weaknesses, and interests
 - Project SEARCH applications for 2022-2023 term are coming in
 - Penn State Health St. Joseph's is continued partner for Project SEARCH
 - Partnership between Project SEARCH and Penn State Health St. Joseph is fruitful and successful – both parties very happy with it

- Transition referrals are increasing
 - Referrals are expected to continue increasing through June, then stop until August 2022
 - This is the usual pattern based on historic trends
- Case loads for transition unit continue to be very high
 - New staff hires expected to help mitigate this
 - Robyn W hired as an intern
 - Lynn Z returning as an annuitant (limited days working per week)
- Question: How many students that OVR serves have 504 plans compared with IEPs?
 - This question may be best answered by Central Office. RDO services very few 504 plan students, and they do not usually go through transition coordinators at the schools. Usually the guidance counselor is the best point of contact for 504 plan students.
 - 504 plans are agreements with the school and student for accommodations. Usually the disability does not impact the student's ability to learn / succeed in educational instruction (i.e.: physical disability, mobility, but also ADHD often included)
- Question: Is RDO doing anything for outreach to 504 plan students?
 - Because 504 plans don't fall under IDEA and schools don't have to follow up with them as stringently, it's difficult to get schools to loop OVR in with the students with 504 plans. Students are often managed by the guidance counselors, and most relationships between RDO and the schools is with the transition coordinators.
 - ERCs do follow up and reach out to the guidance counselors and other staff to keep aware of any 504 plan students who may be interested in / benefit from OVR.
 - Information to 504 plan students about OVR is inconsistent across the school districts, and this is something RDO should address.
- Private schools appear to be underserved with both IEP and 504 plan students. This is possibly because OVR doesn't fit their projected "high-status" image.
- The OVR online application process was discussed.
 - The online application process was discussed at the recent PARC meeting.
 - The online application process is being updated by Central Office to be more user friendly.
 - As it is now, there are multiple problems with the OVR pre-application:
 - There are no directions on how to apply found on the PA Labor and Industry (L&I) website or on the Commonwealth Workforce Development System (CWDS) website
 - Directions on how to apply should be easily located on the L&I or the CWDS sites. A user should not have to go off-site to be given instructions on how to apply.
 - Instructions that were found by googling were confusing and not helpful.
 - Users who want to apply usually have to call during office hours (M-F 8:30-4:30) to complete a pre-application
 - Many individuals work shifts or have other barriers in their life preventing from calling during the office hours.
 - Fielding calls for pre-applications take up a lot of staff time.
 - Staff assistance takes away the empowerment of the individual who may have otherwise been able to complete the pre-application on their own online.
 - The wording "pre-application for OVR services" is confusing.
 - Members of the public don't understand why it's called a "pre-application" instead of just "application".
 - The naming of the pre-application as a document across OVR sites is inconsistent and unclear.
 - Language accessibility for the pre-application is not consistent.
 - A large population of PA is Spanish speaking, but there is no Spanish language version of the pre-application.

- CSAVR, which documents unserved and underserved communities, has identified a large demographic of individuals who encounter language comprehension barriers.
 - OVR is a government agency. Why is the pre-application (a publicly accessed document) not available in Spanish?
 - Automated translating services (i.e. Google Translate) takes the onus off OVR, but as a government agency, OVR should be the gold standard for accessibility.
- The pre-application process is not streamlined.
 - The pre-application takes up multiple pages.
 - If anything is missing / forgotten and designated as a required field, the pre-application can't be submitted.
 - If a user is unclear how to answer that question, they might leave it blank.
 - A user may have thought they completed everything but missed something.
 - Applicants can time out while they are attempting to complete everything.
- Is it possible to add a chat box or even a bot with a FAQ to help someone with questions they may have while attempting to complete the pre-application?
- Wanted: Standardized procedures for following up with incomplete pre-applications across the entire state.
 - Each district office seems to have their own ways of doing things for addressing pre-applications.
 - RDO sends an email / letter (per applicant preference) alerting them of the incomplete status and asking them to either complete or call to finish the pre-application. This has helped improve applicant numbers.
 - Can the system automatically send an email reminder?
 - Online retail sites have a reminder for unpurchased items in the cart. Why can't OVR have a similar reminder service?
- The pre-application is unnecessarily long and complicated.
 - Previous iterations of the pre-application were simpler and easier for an applicant to complete.
 - VRCs likely only need the basics at the time of application:
 - Name
 - Contact information
 - Nature of disability
 - How disability impacts applicant's ability to gain/maintain employment
 - RSA information can be collected by the VRC at the initial interview. It does not NEED to be collected at the time of the pre-application.
 - OVR staff has stated that they miss the in-depth conversations that are prompted from previous pre-application processes.
 - VRCs got into the job because they wanted to counsel individuals
 - Current pre-application process takes much of the counseling away from the VRCs, adding to job dissatisfaction.
- Potential solutions to stated issues with the OVR pre-application:
 - Create a simplified apply/referral setting on the OVR site through the PA Department of Labor and Industry site that leads to instructions and the Careerlink/CWDS.PA.GOV site.
 - Include clearer descriptions on the pre application/referral process and application instruction in publications on the OVR site.
 - Create a system for monitoring pre-applications not fully submitted, if there is not one already in place, to ensure everyone applying can submit the full application.
 - Revise the pre-application title, this can be confusing for those applying.

- Consider doing away with the pre-application process altogether to weed out confusion over the process.

3. ANNOUNCEMENTS FOR GENERAL GOOD:

- Discussion continued from previous meeting regarding the social media options proposal.
 - Angel has sent the draft of the proposal to Yvelisse. Yvelisse has sent the proposal up to Susan Storm for review.
 - Is it possible to have a group for CACs in the OVR Facebook page so items like meeting dates / agenda can be disseminated to the public more easily?
 - It is important to continue reaching out to the public to attempt to include individuals with disabilities in both OVR and the CAC as much as possible.
 - Information such as meeting dates, call in & PIN information, and brochure information all need to be updated frequently.
 - This information is usually posted to PARC website, but the PARC website is currently undergoing updates and it is unclear when updates will be posted at this time.
 - Can the CAC submit the quarterly agenda to PARC ahead of time so interested individuals not currently on the CAC can view?
 - Andrew P has recently been elected to the PARC, and he will look into this information
 - Angel will check if the CAC minutes are being posted and let Yvelisse know if they were not posted timely.
 - If they are not posted, Yvelisse will follow up to determine that the minutes were forwarded to the correct parties.
 - The PARC website link for the CAC goes to “benefits.gov” not to CAC or OVR information.
- Elections are upcoming for a fall/winter election date.
 - Co-chairs were just elected, so they will continue serving.
 - Chairperson is up for election.
 - Chairperson must be a potential or former customer of OVR, and as such an individual with a disability.

4. OTHER BUSINESS:

- None

5. AGENDA FOR NEXT MEETING:

- None

6. NEXT MEETING:

- CITIZENS’ ADVISORY COMMITTEE TO THE READING OVR
- JUNE 14, 2022
- MEETING 1:00 PM TO 3:00PM
- VIRTUALLY OVER MICROSOFT TEAMS

7. ADJOURNMENT:

- Motion to adjourn at 3:15 PM.
- Motion: Andrew
- Second: Sally